

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez (CA-47) today issued the following “Dear Colleague” letter to fellow Members of Congress, urging them to “be a voice for voiceless” women democracy advocates in Vietnam:

“Imagine being denied your right to speak, assemble and worship as you please. Imagine being beaten, imprisoned and denied a fair trial. These are daily occurrences in Vietnam. Now imagine, despite all these human rights violations, the same government is not only granted membership into the World Trade Organization (WTO) and United Nations Security Council but also taken off the Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) list despite their ongoing persecution of churches and temples.

“Currently, democracy activist and writer Tran Khai Thanh Thuy is sitting in prison after being beaten and arrested for expressing her support for nine patriotic human rights activists who had been sentenced to prison for violating Vietnamese anti-propaganda laws and showing their support for democracy and human rights. She has been sentenced to three and a half years in prison.

“As a country that was found upon freedom, it is the United States’ responsibility to support the people of Vietnam’s fight for democracy and freedom. Currently, there are men and women imprisoned for defending their rights and freedom and we must be their voice and break the silence the people of Vietnam continue to suffer under their government. At this moment, there are activists crying out and sacrificing the very thing they are fighting for, it is a cry for freedom from oppression.

“I urge my colleagues to help me raise awareness and support the activism of the women democracy activists currently imprisoned and under house arrest by adopting a Voice of Conscience. Below is a list of three prominent women activists with a description of their current situation.

“As Members of Congress, it is our duty to speak for those who have no voice. We must collectively stand up for the freedom of these activists by urging the Vietnamese government to unconditionally release these activists. You can also write to the activist you decide to advocate for, and write to President Obama and Secretary Clinton urging them to use diplomatic pressure to release your activists. Regardless of who you are advocating for, we as Members of

Congress have an obligation to engage the Government of Vietnam and call on them to uphold and respect human rights by releasing all activists. Many times, letters to imprisoned individuals are intercepted by authorities, but your letters will let the authorities know that the person being persecuted is not anonymous and the United States House of Representatives hears their voices in Washington D.C.”

Tran Khai Thanh Thuy, Novelist, blogger, democracy activist

Born: November 26, 1960

Activity: Novelist, journalist, democracy activist

Location: Prison Camp 1, Hoa Lo, Tu Liem district, Ha Noi, Viet Nam

Sentence: 3.5 years imprisonment

A prolific novelist and journalist, Tran Khai Thanh Thuy is a recipient of Human Rights Watch’s Hellman/Hammett Award and an Honorary Member of English PEN. A member of Bloc 8406, she is also an editor of the underground magazine To Quoc (Fatherland).

Since September 2006, she has been repeatedly harassed and interrogated for her writings protesting social injustice. During a sham “people’s court,” she was publicly denounced and humiliated by hundreds of people gathered by the police. On April 21, 2007 she was arrested at her home and later sentenced to nine months and ten days imprisonment for “disturbing public order.” She suffers from diabetes and advanced tuberculosis but was refused medical care in detention. Thuy was released on January 31, 2008, but remained under police surveillance.

Thuy was arrested again on October 8, 2009 after supporting fellow democracy activists on trial. The authorities sent plain-clothes police officers to harass her family. Thuy was hit with bricks and suffered from head injuries. The incident was witnessed by her 13-year old daughter who

was left alone after police took Thuy and her husband away.

While the couple was detained, the state-controlled media began publishing a fictitious version of the actual events that led to the arrest.

Thuy was sentenced to three and a half years imprisonment for “physical assault” on February 5, 2010. The international community—including the US Embassy in Hanoi, Members of Congress, EU and Australian MPs and international NGOs—strongly condemned her arrest and trial.

Le Thi Cong Nhan, Human rights lawyer, democracy activist

Born: July 20, 1979

Activity: Human rights lawyer

Address: Phong 316, nha A7, Tap The van Phong Chinh Phu - Ngo 4,

Pho Phuong Mai - Dong Da, Ha Noi, Viet Nam

Sentence: 3 years house arrest following 3 years imprisonment

Having organized seminars for students relating to international human rights law, Le Thi Cong Nhan is an outspoken advocate and supporter of multiparty democracy. She is a founding member and spokesperson for the Vietnam Progression Party, one of several groups formed in 2006 calling for democracy and freedom of expression and association, and for human rights to be respected.

Nhan was arrested in March 2007 when fifteen security police stormed her home. Though a lawyer trained in human rights law, she was denied the chance to represent herself in court.

Protesting poor conditions in prison, Nhan went on hunger strike for several days during her detention in March 2007. Nhan's jail sentence sparked condemnation from the international community. She was visited in prison by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom.

After three years imprisonment, Nhan was released on March 6, 2010. She is now under house arrest for three years.

Pham Thanh Nghien, Democracy activist

Born: November 24, 1977

Activity: Democracy activist

Location: Prison camp Tran Phu, Hai Phong, Viet Nam

Sentence: 4 years imprisonment and 3 years house arrest

In 2007, when the wool company where she worked went bankrupt, Pham Thanh Nghien started advocating on behalf of landless farmers and writing articles calling for human rights and democracy. Authorities barred her from attending the trial of her close friend, the democracy campaigner Le Thi Cong Nhan, and she has been repeatedly harassed by the police, who regularly brought her in for aggressive questioning.

Nghien was particularly critical of the meek policies of the Vietnamese government relating to territorial and maritime disputes with China.

In Spring 2008, Nghien was arrested in Hanoi, along with several other activists, while peacefully protesting the Beijing Olympic Torch Relay. She was detained for several days without charge. On June 17, 2008, she wrote an official request to organize a protest which was rejected by the Vietnamese government. In response to her request, security police continuously harassed Nghien and her family.

Disappointed by this action, Nghien decided to hold a sit-in protest in her own house. This led to her arrest on September 18, 2009. In a closed trial in Hai Phong on January 29, 2010, Nghien was sentenced to four years in prison, followed by three years house arrest. She is a recipient of the Hellman/Hammett award from Human Rights Watch.